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ABSTRACT

It is often difficult to distinguish those students with learning problems due to individual differences in learning styles or achievement difficulties from those students with specific disorders; failure to do so sometimes results in inappropriate referral of language minority students to special education. It also contributes to disproportionate representation of those students in special education. These children suffer from the stigma of being labelled handicapped and may lose ground academically. Formal prereferral intervention is recommended, governed by a clearly articulated set of procedures followed by all personnel. Teacher assistance teams can be used to facilitate prereferral problem-solving. This process provides valuable insights for classroom teachers and team members regarding potential sources of student difficulties and can help distinguish learning problem types. At each step of the process, specific questions should address such issues as the problem; curricula and instructional materials; teacher characteristics; teaching style; teacher expectations and perceptions; student characteristics such as language proficiency, culture, and socioeconomic status; exposure to the curriculum; evaluation of instructional effectiveness; and alternative interventions. Prereferral intervention in which the major objective is to improve the effectiveness of regular education is a cost-effective approach. (MSE)

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Preventing Inappropriate Referrals of Language Minority Students to Special Education

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INTRODUCTION

The reasons that students experience academic failure can be organized into three broad categories (adapted from Adelman, 1970). The first type of learning problem (Type I) occurs when students are in classroom environments which do not accommodate their individual differences or learning styles. For example, limited-English-proficient (LEP) students who need native language or English-as-a-second-language (ESL) instruction, but who are taught solely in English without any adaptation of the curricula, can be expected to experience academic difficulties. Other children have achievement difficulties (Type II), but must be served in the regular classroom because their problems cannot be attributed to handicapping conditions. A Type II student who has not learned to read due to excessive absences, for instance, can overcome these deficits when instruction is individualized, or when remediation programs are provided. Type III children, on the other hand, have major disorders which interfere with the teaching-learning process. Because they are handicapped, these students require special education instruction to prepare them to be successfully mainstreamed into regular classrooms and to assure that they achieve their maximum potential.

Failure to distinguish Types I and II from Type III learning problems results in the inappropriate referral of language minority students to special education and contributes to the disproportionate representation of these students in special education, particularly in classes for the learning disabled (Tucker, 1981; Ortiz & Yates, 1983; Cummins, 1984). Examination of characteristics of limited-English-proficient students in programs for the learning disabled (Cummins, 1984; Ortiz et al., 1985) and the speech and language handicapped (Ortiz, Garcia, Wheeler, & Maldonado-Colon, 1986) suggests that neither the data gathered as part of the referral and evaluation process nor the decisions made using these data reflect that professionals adequately understand limited English proficiency, second language acquisition, cultural and other differences which mediate students' learning. These findings support a growing body of literature indicating that many students served in special education experience difficulties which are "pedagogically induced" (Cummins, 1984).

Some would argue that there is no harm in placing students who are already failing in the regular classroom into special education where they will get individualized instruction from teachers who are specially trained to remediate learning problems. Wilkinson and Ortiz (1986), however, found that after three years of special education placement, Hispanic students who were classified as learning disabled had actually lost ground. Their verbal and performance IQ scores were lower than they had been at initial entry into special education and their achievement scores were at essentially the same level as at entry. Neither regular education nor special education programs adequately served the academic needs of these language minority students, a situation which further underscores the need for prereferral intervention. Otherwise, Type I and II students will experience the stigma of being labeled as handicapped without significantly improving their educational status.

USING TEACHER ASSISTANCE TEAMS FOR PREREFERRAL INTERVENTION

To address issues of inappropriate referral and placement of minority children in special education, one must examine the *quality* of instruction provided in the mainstream and the *validity* of referral and assessment processes (Heller, Holtzman & Messick, 1982). Such examination can be routinely provided through the implementation of a prereferral intervention process in which teachers are helped to remediate students' difficulties in the context of the regular classroom before a special education referral is considered.

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An effective prereferral process can help distinguish achievement difficulties that are associated with a failure to accommodate individual differences from problems that stem from handicapping conditions.

Chalfant and Pysh (1981) recommend the use of Teacher Assistance Teams (TAT), whereby committees comprised of regular classroom teachers elected by their peers facilitate prereferral problem-solving. The Teacher Assistance Team and the referring teacher meet together to discuss problems which are becoming apparent, brainstorm possible solutions, and develop an action plan which is then implemented by the referring teacher with the support of team members. The team conducts follow-up meetings to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed interventions and to develop other instructional recommendations if necessary. It is the Teacher Assistance Team which ultimately decides whether the student should be referred to special education.

Unlike most special education *referral* committees, Teacher Assistance Teams do not involve special education personnel (e.g., special education teachers or psychologists), except when they are invited to serve as consultants to the committee. This committee structure emphasizes that the TAT is under the authority and is the responsibility of the regular education system. It is this authority which distinguishes the prereferral from the referral process. Although in practice referral committees are considered a regular education function, the involvement of special education personnel frequently overshadows this intent, making it easier to move students into special education. The failure of referral committees to serve as gatekeepers to special education is indicated by the high referral-to-assessment-to-placement rates (75-90%) reported in the literature (Reynolds, 1984).

There are several benefits to the use of Teacher Assistance Teams. Teachers are provided a day-to-day peer problem-solving unit within their school building and thus do not have to experience long delays until external support can be provided (Chalfant, Pysh, & Moultrie, 1979). Moreover, a collaborative learning community is established since the team process actually provides continuous staff development focused on management of instruction and students for all persons involved. Finally, the use of TAT serves to reduce the number of inappropriate referrals to special education because most problems can be taken care of by regular education personnel.

A PREREFERRAL MODEL FOR LANGUAGE MINORITY STUDENTS

The key to success of Teacher Assistance Teams is the quality of the brainstorming and of the strategy selection process. These require that team members understand the characteristics of effective teaching and classroom and behavior management, and that they have an in-depth understanding of the student populations they serve so that instructional recommendations are appropriate to the needs and background characteristics of students. Moreover, team members must understand that a variety of factors can contribute to students' difficulties, including the characteristics of classrooms, programs and teachers.

The prereferral model presented in Figure 1 (see page 3) provides valuable insights for classroom teachers and team members regarding potential sources of student difficulties and can help them distinguish Types I and II from Type III problems. The model attempts to build upon existing prereferral efforts (Graden, Casey & Christenson, 1985; Heller, Holtzman & Messick, 1982; Tucker, 1981) by raising a series of questions which must be addressed before a referral to special education is initiated. While many of the questions are appropriate for any student, an effort has been made to identify questions particularly germane to students in bilingual education and English-as-a-second-language programs.

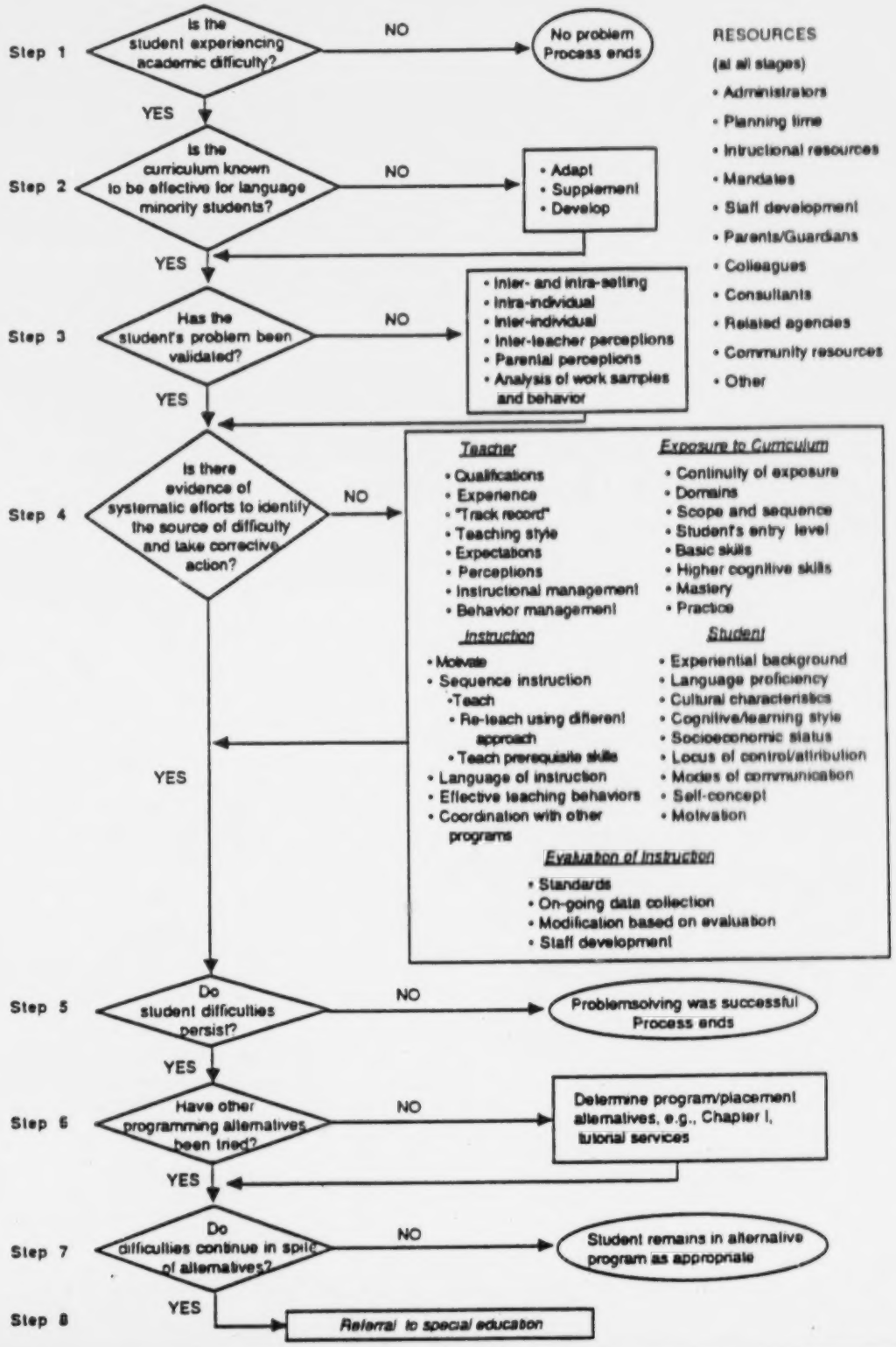
In the following sections, questions to be raised at each step of prereferral intervention are presented and follow-up questions which should be asked at each stage of the process are identified. Though by no means exhaustive, these follow-up questions are intended to represent issues that must be considered to more accurately identify the cause(s) of students' difficulties.

Step 1
Is the student experiencing academic difficulty?

Because of the diversity of student backgrounds and the range of abilities typically found in regular classrooms, it is to be expected that some students will experience academic difficulty. However, it is important for teachers to understand that very few students experience difficulty because of a handicapping condition. National incidence figures indicate that only 10-12% of the student population is handicapped (Kaskowitz, 1977; Ortiz & Yates, 1983). Handicapping conditions include mental retardation, hearing and vision impairments, emotional disturbance, physical and health impairments, deaf-blindness, multiple handicaps, and specific learning disabilities. Linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic and other background differences are not considered handicapping conditions. As a matter of fact, the special education assessment process must clearly document that a student's learning difficulties are not the result of factors such as limited knowledge of English or lack of opportunities to learn. Consequently, prereferral interventions aimed at identifying the sources of the problem

Figure 1

Preventing Inappropriate Placements of Language Minority Students in Special Education: A Prereferral Process



and improving the student's performance in the mainstream should be attempted before referral to special education is considered.

Step 2
Are the curricula and instructional materials known to be effective for language minority students?

A beginning point in addressing the question of whether curricula and/or instructional materials are effective for second language learners is to examine achievement patterns in a district or on an individual campus. Representation of students at the high, middle, and low levels of standardized achievement scores should be proportional with the ethnic composition of the educational unit being studied. If LEP students historically make the lowest achievement scores, or are overrepresented in special education, particularly in the category of learning disabilities, indications are that either the curriculum is ineffective for these students or that it has been poorly implemented. The curricula and instructional materials should be reviewed to determine whether they present both minority and majority perspectives and contributions and to determine whether they are relevant to students' language and culture. If student failure can be attributed to the use of inappropriate curricula or to ineffective instructional materials, then referrals to special education are unwarranted. Efforts, instead, should focus on modifying or creating more effective instructional programs.

Program Development and Adaptation

Special language programs exemplify the program development phase suggested by the prereferral model. The recognition that limited-English-proficient students cannot learn if they do not understand or speak the language of instruction led to the development of bilingual education and English-as-a-second-language programs. Less recognized, perhaps, is that regular classroom teachers must also adapt the curriculum and instruction for language minority students who do not qualify for special language programs and for students who have been exited from bilingual education or ESL. Although these students have good conversational English skills, many do not have the cognitive academic language skills (Cummins, 1984) needed to handle the language used by teachers in instruction and that found in textbooks. Rather than treat these language minority students as though they were native speakers of English, teachers must incorporate language development activities into the curriculum to help students expand and refine their English language skills to a level commensurate with English-speaking peers. Language development programs are also important for students from lower socioeconomic status environments who have intact language skills for the purposes of communication at home and in their community, but because of differences in experiences do not have language skills, even in their primary language, which match the linguistic demands of the bilingual/ESL classroom. Unless these language skills are taught, such students will be predisposed to school failure.

Step 3
Has the problem been validated?

Identification of a student "problem" typically involves a judgment that the behavior is deviant from the norm. In the case of language minority students, the norm or reference group must represent the child's linguistic and cultural community. Several factors must be considered before the conclusion that behavior is abnormal can be validated, including observation and data collection in the following areas (Tucker, 1981):

1. *Inter- and intra-setting comparisons* to measure the extent to which the perceived problem is manifested across different occasions and settings.
2. *Inter-individual comparisons* must also be made to assess whether the perceived problem behaviors differ from those of other students in the class. The cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic and other relevant characteristics of the comparison group must be similar to those of the target student.
3. *Inter-teacher perceptions* to identify any teacher- or setting-specific problems that may exist, as is the case when similar problems fail to be noted by the student's other teachers.
4. *Parental perceptions* to determine whether parents confirm the school's perceptions. In such cases it is more likely that a problem exists.
5. *Analysis of student work samples and behavior* to determine the specific nature of the perceived problem. The problem should be described in precise, measurable terms, rather than using broad, general descriptors such as "below grade level in math," "cannot read well," or "has a short attention span." Work samples and behavioral analyses can also help develop hypotheses about the source of the difficulty. Is the student experiencing difficulty with division because she/he cannot multiply? Does the student fail to meet expectations for classroom behavior because the norms are different from those of his home or community? Work samples are particularly important for students in bilingual education programs in that they serve to verify, or question, results obtained from standardized achievement tests which do not usually include representative samples of ethnic or language minority groups and which do not measure native language skills or achievement.

Step 4
Is there evidence of systematic efforts to identify the source of difficulty and to take corrective action?

Since failure itself is a multi-faceted phenomenon, it is likely that the solution, too, will involve more than one aspect of the child's school experience. Solutions must be approached from various perspectives, to include teacher-, student-, curriculum- and instruction-related factors. Thus, in some instances, corrective actions include professional development and training for teachers; in other cases, the student may have to be taught prerequisite skills; in still other situations, a redirection of curricula and evaluation of instructional programs may be required.

Teacher Characteristics

Teachers may not possess the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to effectively meet the needs of students from diverse cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds. When teacher and student characteristics differ along any or all of these dimensions, the potential for conflict and failure increases considerably. According to Gay (1981), such differences are often manifested as conflicts which are *substantive* (e.g., disagreement over educational goals), *procedural* (e.g., mismatch of teaching and learning styles) or *interpersonal* (e.g., culturally relevant behaviors interpreted as behavior "problems"). All three conditions affect teaching effectiveness and a student's ability to profit from instruction. It is, therefore, essential to examine the effectiveness of instruction, including the teacher's qualifications, experience, and teaching history, during the prereferral process. Examples of questions to be asked about teacher-related variables are given in Figure 2.

Teaching Style. Teachers are predisposed to teach in ways that correspond to their own learning styles (Ramirez & Castaneda, 1974). This poses few difficulties for students whose learning styles correspond to the teacher's teaching style, but can be devastating for those whose styles are incompatible with the instructional approaches being used. Teachers can maximize learning by using a variety of techniques when they deliver instruction thus giving *all* students the opportunity to utilize their own modality preferences or cognitive styles. This can be achieved by the use of multi-sensory teaching aids, learning centers where students can learn material in a variety of ways, diversified grouping patterns, variations in reinforcement systems, and so forth. Additionally, students can be taught to use alternative learning styles thus increasing their chances of being successful, regardless of task conditions.

Figure 2

Teacher Variables

Experiential Background

- Does the teacher have the training and experience to work effectively with multicultural populations?
- What resources has the teacher utilized in attempting to resolve the problem?
  - *district resources (instructional supervisors, inservice training, media and materials)*
  - *volunteers*
  - *community resources*
  - *colleagues*
  - *external consultants*
  - *professional associations*

Culture

- Has the teacher gathered cultural information specific to the student and his/her family?
  - *native/traditional versus immigrant group*
  - *parent interviews*
  - *student interviews*
  - *home visits*
- Does the teacher incorporate aspects of the student's culture into the curriculum?
  - *pluralistic goals, perspectives*
  - *integrating information across subject areas versus isolating units or presenting fragmented bits of information around holidays, festivals, etc.*
  - *accurate representation of culture and contributions of the group*

Language Proficiency

- Are the teacher's language skills adequate to deliver instruction in the student's native language?
- If the student is not in bilingual education, what resources have been utilized to provide native language support?
- Is the teacher adequately trained to provide dual language instruction? English-as-a-second-language intervention?
- Were the student's linguistic characteristics addressed by the teacher in planning instruction?
  - *Comprehensible input is provided.*
  - *Focus of instruction is on meaning rather than error correction.*
  - *There are opportunities for English language acquisition.*

Teaching Style/Learning Style

- Is the teacher aware of his/her own preferred teaching style?
- Is the teacher aware of the student's preferred learning style?
- Does the teacher use a variety of styles to accommodate various learning styles of students? Is the student's style addressed?

Expectations/Perceptions

- What are the teacher's perceptions of the student?
- Are expectations and level of instruction geared to higher levels of thinking?
- How does the teacher view cultural diversity in the classroom?
- How do these views influence expectations as well as instructional planning?

Teacher Expectations and Perceptions. Teachers sometimes judge students' competence on the basis of race, sex, socioeconomic, linguistic and cultural differences, rather than on actual abilities (Bergen & Smith, 1966; Jackson & Cosca, 1974; Rist, 1970; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, & Graden, 1982). Research on teacher expectations (Good & Brophy, 1973) further suggests that teachers differentially interact with students for whom they hold low expectations. For example, they wait less time for students to respond, offer fewer opportunities to learn, focus on student behavior and discipline rather than academic work, reinforce inappropriate behaviors, seat low expectation students further away and call on them less frequently. Differential behaviors have also been noted in the treatment of boys and girls. Teachers with traditional sex role stereotypes may do a task for girls but give boys extended directions to complete the activity, interpret girls' silence as ignorance versus interpreting boys' silence as evidence of thought and reflection, and provide girls with less feedback, positive or negative, than boys (Sadker & Sadker, 1982). As the quality of instruction is diminished over time, for specific groups of students this alone could explain differences in achievement levels. Patterns of teacher-pupil interactions should be analyzed to determine whether they facilitate or hinder student performance. Additionally, teachers' expectations should be evaluated to ensure that they are neither too high nor too low, since student frustration and failure can occur under either condition.

Student Characteristics

The complexity of providing appropriate instructional opportunities is immediately apparent when one considers the diversity of characteristics among language minority students. Those characteristics discussed in the following sections (and see Figure 3, page 7) serve only to suggest the range of student variables which must be considered in planning instruction. A comprehensive description of background and experiences is required to make instruction uniquely appropriate to the student. The prereferral process should verify that the teacher has been able to tailor instruction to the needs of the student in question. Examples of teacher ability to accommodate cultural and linguistic diversity are also presented in Figure 2.

Language Proficiency. There is wide diversity in the language characteristics of LEP students: diversity which at one extreme is descriptive of individuals reared in communities where the primary language is Spanish and at the other extreme characteristic of students reared in environments where the primary language is English. Determining the point on the language continuum which is most characteristic of students' first and second language skills is important to choosing the language of instruction (Ortiz, 1984). Language evaluations should produce data which describe the child's interpersonal communication skills and should emphasize analysis of English pragmatic skills, rather than structural accuracy (e.g., correctness of phonology, syntax, grammar). A focus on pragmatic skills is important because LEP students will make numerous errors on the surface forms of English. Teachers may inaccurately conclude that these errors suggest a possible language disability rather than that they verify the student's LEP status.

Critical to distinguishing learning disabilities from linguistic differences is the assessment of a child's academic language proficiency (Cummins, 1984). In addition to evaluating interpersonal communication skills, assessments should also measure the literacy-related aspects of language. Procedures which capture whether a child understands teacher-talk (e.g., tests of dictation or story retelling) and whether she/he can handle the language found in texts (e.g., cloze procedures or comprehension checks which tap evaluation or inferential skills) are recommended. Unless these skills are measured, teachers may attribute low achievement to learning disabilities when they may, in fact, be related to lack of academic language proficiency. Frequently, students at greatest risk of being misdiagnosed as handicapped are those who have received ESL instruction long enough to acquire basic interpersonal communication skills (approximately 1-2 years), but who need more time to develop academic language proficiency (approximately 5-7 years).

Culture. Understanding cultural characteristics is an important aspect of distinguishing differences from handicapping conditions. While some behaviors do not conform to the desired or expected behaviors of the majority society, they may, nonetheless, be normal given a student's ethnic or cultural group. Such behaviors are best characterized as differences rather than handicapping conditions. Educators must learn as much as possible about diversity within cultures, and about the contemporary culture of students, so they can create learning environments and curricula which are uniquely compatible with student characteristics, with expectations and desires of parents, and with school and community norms.

Socioeconomic Status. Developmental patterns of children from poverty environments differ from those of middle class students. When children's experiences do not match those expected by teachers and schools, teachers may attribute school problems to "deficient" environments and may lower their expectations for student success (Ortiz & Yates, 1984). Unfortunately, teachers sometimes fail to recognize that economic differences affect cognitive and learning styles,

causing children to respond in different ways to instruction. For example, children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have difficulty processing information or profiting from instruction presented from a framework of independence and intrinsic motivation, if they fail to perceive their own effort as an important cause of success or failure. These students will not be successful unless they are taught using strategies compatible with their own cognitive orientations and/or until they are taught "learning to learn" strategies (e.g., setting goals, planning for goal attainment, sequencing behavior, and intrinsic motivation).

Figure 3
Student Variables

Experiential Background

- o Are there any factors in the student's school history which may be related to the current difficulty?
  - *attendance/mobility*
  - *opportunities to learn*
  - *program placement(s)*
  - *quality of prior instruction*
- o Are there any variables related to family history which may have affected school performance?
  - *lifestyle*
  - *length of residence in the U.S.*
  - *stress (e.g., poverty, lack of emotional support)*
- o Are there any variables related to the student's medical history which may have affected school performance?
  - *vision*
  - *hearing*
  - *illness*
  - *nutrition*
  - *trauma or injury*

Culture

- o How is the student's cultural background different from the culture of the school and larger society? (Mattes & Omark, 1984; Saville-Troike, 1978)
  - *family (family size and structure, roles, responsibilities, expectations)*
  - *aspirations (success, goals)*
  - *language and communication (rules for adult, adult-child, child-child communication, language use at home, non-verbal communication)*
  - *religion (dietary restrictions, role expectations)*
  - *traditions and history (contact with homeland, reason for immigration)*
  - *decorum and discipline (standards for acceptable behavior)*
- o To what extent are the student's characteristics representative of the larger group?
  - *continuum of culture (traditional, dualistic, atraditional [Ramírez & Castañeda, 1974])*
  - *degree of acculturation or assimilation*
- o Is the student able to function successfully in more than one cultural setting?
- o Is the student's behavior culturally appropriate?

Language Proficiency

- o Which is the student's dominant language? Which is the preferred?
  - *settings (school, playground, home, church, etc.)*
  - *topics (academic subjects, day-to-day interactions)*
  - *speakers (parents, teachers, siblings, peers, etc.)*
  - *aspects of each language (syntax, vocabulary, phonology, use)*
  - *expressive vs. receptive*
- o What is the student's level of proficiency in the primary language and in English? (Cummins, 1984)
  - *interpersonal communication skills*
  - *cognitive/academic literacy-related skills*
- o Are the styles of verbal interaction used in the primary language different from those most valued at school, in English? (Heath, 1986)
  - *label quests (e.g., what's this? who?)*
  - *meaning quests (adult infers for child, interprets or asks for explanation)*
  - *accounts (generated by teller, information new to listener; e.g., show & tell, creative writing)*
  - *eventcasts (running narrative on events as they unfold, or forecast of events in preparation)*
  - *stories*
- o If so, has the student been exposed to those that are unfamiliar to him/her?
- o What is the extent and nature of exposure to each language?
  - *What language(s) do the parents speak to each other?*
  - *What language(s) do the parents speak to the child?*
  - *What language(s) do the children use with each other?*
  - *What television programs are seen in each language?*
  - *Are stories read to the child? In what language(s)?*
- o Are student behaviors characteristic of second language acquisition?
- o What types of language intervention has the student received?
  - *bilingual vs. monolingual instruction*
  - *language development, enrichment, remediation*
  - *additive vs. subtractive bilingualism (transition versus maintenance)*

Learning Style

- o Does the student's learning style require curricular/instructional accommodation?
  - *perceptual style differences (e.g. visual vs. auditory learner)*
  - *cognitive style differences (e.g., inductive vs. deductive thinking)*
  - *preferred style of participation (e.g., teacher vs. student directed, small vs. large group)*
- o If so, were these characteristics accommodated, or were alternative styles taught?

Motivational Influences

- o Is the student's self-concept enhanced by school experiences?
  - *school environment communicates respect for culture and language*
  - *student experiences academic and social success*
- o Is schooling perceived as relevant and necessary for success in the student's family and community?
  - *aspirations*
  - *realistic expectations based on community experience*
  - *culturally different criteria for success*
  - *education perceived by the community as a tool for assimilation*

Exposure to the Curriculum

The central questions to be answered in determining whether children have had sufficient exposure to the curriculum are whether they have been taught the subject or skill and/or whether this instruction has been interrupted. Students experience discontinuity of instruction for a variety of reasons, including having to stay home to take care of younger brothers and sisters in family emergencies, fatigue because they work late hours to help support the family, or simply because they are experiencing so many school-related problems that avoiding school is a way of relieving the pain of failure. These interruptions of schooling negatively affect academic achievement and, if not addressed in a timely fashion, can have cumulative effects devastating to future success. Unless teachers provide ways for under-achieving students to catch up with peers, learning problems which develop are more likely to be associated with the lack of opportunity to learn, rather than with handicapping conditions. Filling in instructional gaps requires that teachers understand skill domains (e.g., that reading requires that children have an adequate language foundation and that they master both word recognition and comprehension skills), so they can assess each child's entry level skills and sequence instruction accordingly. Figure 4 suggests areas which should be explored at this stage.

Figure 4

Exposure to the Curriculum

- o Were skills in question taught?
- o Did student receive adequate exposure to curriculum?
  - *in his/her dominant language*
  - *sufficient practice to achieve mastery*
- o Was instruction sensitive to student's level of performance?
  - *instructional, frustrational, independent levels*
  - *higher level cognitive skills vs. basic skills*
- o Was adequate mastery of skills/concepts ensured prior to moving on to new material?

Higher Cognitive Skills. Cazden (1984) criticizes school effectiveness research because it places too much emphasis on the development of skills which are easily quantifiable (e.g., math activities in which answers can be judged as right or wrong) and virtually ignores instruction involving more complex, abstract concepts and development of critical thinking skills, the outcomes of which are oftentimes difficult to measure. Cummins (1984) concurs, indicating that the predominant instructional model, in regular and special education, is based on task analyses which structure learning in small, sequential steps: students may be able to complete each step but are sometimes unable to reconstruct the whole task because it has been stripped of meaning. Task analysis is antithetical, not only to higher order skill development, but in the case of LEP students, to the acquisition of English as a second language. Cummins recommends, instead, a reciprocal interaction model in which the teacher serves as a facilitator of learning, focuses on higher order cognitive skills, and integrates language use and development into all aspects of curriculum content. Such a model is expected to produce more effective learners and may decrease the need for specialized intervention outside the mainstream. The prereferral process should describe the instructional model being utilized by the teacher to determine whether the approach, in and of itself, is maintaining low functioning levels and reinforcing marginal, semi-dependent behavior (Harth, 1982).

Basic Skills. Because special education referrals are usually concerned with mastery of basic skills, the prereferral process should document the extent and nature of prior instruction in these areas. Of particular interest is the language in which skills were initially taught. It is not uncommon for LEP students to be referred to special education on the basis of low English skills, even though their first schooling experiences were in bilingual education programs in which basic skills were taught in the native language (L1). For these students, a referral would be inappropriate until data such as the following are analyzed: (a) the child's English (L2) and native language proficiency, (b) informal assessment results describing level of basic skills functioning in L1 and L2, (c) information about when the transition to English language instruction occurred, and (d) whether the child was functioning adequately in the native language at the time of the transition. These data can help determine whether the child's problems are pedagogically induced as might be the case, for example, if English language instruction were begun before the child had adequately mastered basic skills in L1, or before she/he had acquired appropriate levels of English language proficiency.

Mastery and Practice. Sufficient time must be allocated for students to achieve subject or skill mastery and for skills practice. Students are sometimes engaged in independent practice activities before they have demonstrated adequate understanding of the task, and thus incorrect patterns or behaviors are reinforced as they work on their own. According to Rosenshine (1983), assuring adequate exposure to the curriculum requires that a child demonstrate mastery at a level of 95 to 100% accuracy. Berliner (1984) suggests that teachers check students' understanding during lesson presentations and that pupils first participate in guided or controlled practice during

which teachers monitor performance to be sure that students are working at high levels of accuracy. Only then should students be involved in independent, unsupervised activities. At the prereferral stages, data are gathered to describe adequacy of lesson presentations and whether the student has had sufficient time to master and practice skills. Evidence that the child received appropriate instruction, but did not profit from it, can later be used to justify a referral for a comprehensive assessment.

Instruction

Before referring a student, teachers should carefully document adaptations of instruction and programs which have been attempted to improve performance in the mainstream. Adelman (1970) suggests that instruction be carefully sequenced as follows: (a) teach basic skills, subjects or concepts; (b) reteach skills or content using significantly different strategies or approaches for the benefit of students who fail to meet expected performance levels after initial instruction; and (c) refocus instruction on the teaching of prerequisite skills for students who continue to experience difficulty even after approaches and materials have been modified. Documentation of this teaching sequence is very helpful if the child fails to make adequate progress and is subsequently referred to special education. Referral committees will be able to judge whether the adaptations attempted were appropriate given the student's background characteristics. It is possible, for example, that a child will fail to learn to read, even after a teacher attempts several different reading approaches, because the child is being instructed in English but is not English proficient. In this case, the interventions would be judged inappropriate and other instructional alternatives would need to be recommended. Ultimately, if the child qualifies for special education services, information about prior instruction is invaluable to the development of individualized educational programs, because the types of interventions which work and those which have met with limited success are already clearly delineated. Figure 5 delineates types of questions to be asked about instruction.

Instruction should be consistent with what is known about language acquisition and about the interrelationship between first and second language development. Some research literature (Cummins, 1984; Krashen, 1982) indicates that the native language may provide the foundation for acquiring English-as-a-second-language skills. Therefore, strong promotion of native language conceptual skills may be more effective in providing a basis for English literacy (Cummins, 1984). Conversely, a premature shift to English-only instruction, may interrupt a natural developmental sequence and may interfere with intellectual and cognitive development. Teachers need to mediate instruction using both the first and the second language and integrate English development with subject matter instruction. Along with this, teachers may consider responding to and using cultural referents during instruction, respecting the values and norms of the home culture even as the norms of the majority culture are being taught (Tikunoff, 1985). Above all, teachers must communicate high expectations for students and a sense of efficacy in terms of their own ability to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Figure 5

Instruction

- o Does the learning environment promote intrinsic motivation?
  - *relevant activities*
  - *incorporation of students' interests*
  - *addressing student needs*
  - *sensitivity to experiential background*
- o Does the teacher use alternative approaches when there is evidence of a learning difficulty?
  - *teach*
  - *reteach using significantly different approaches*
  - *teach prerequisite skills*
- o Does the teacher use strategies that are known to be effective for language minority students?
  - *native language and ESL instruction*
  - *genuine dialogue with students*
  - *contextualized instruction*
  - *collaborative learning*
  - *self-regulated learning*
- o Does the teacher use current approaches to the teaching of ESL?
  - *Total Physical Response Approach (Asher, 1979)*
  - *The Natural Approach (Terrell, 1983)*
  - *Sheltered English Teaching (Northcutt & Watson, 1986)*
- o Does the teacher use approaches to literacy development which focus on meaningful communication?
  - *shared book experiences (Holdaway, 1979)*
  - *Graves' Writing Workshop (Graves, 1983)*
  - *language experience stories*
  - *dialogue journals (Staton, 1987)*
  - *journals*

Evaluation of Instruction

Obviously, any instructional program must involve a continuous monitoring system to determine whether goals and objectives are being met. In the classroom, evaluation is teacher-driven and requires that teachers continuously check student progress through daily quizzes, six-week examinations, or informal observations, for example, and that they provide feedback to students about academic progress. It does not help to return a student's spelling test or math assignment with answers marked wrong but no information as to why responses were incorrect and thus, no indication

as to how performance can be improved. Simply marking answers as right or wrong does not clue the teacher as to how to modify instruction or plan subsequent lessons for students experiencing difficulty. A data-based approach involving simple, informal observation and analysis of student work samples is more effective in increasing student achievement (Zigmond & Miller, 1986). For limited-English-proficient students, data must describe the child's functioning levels in English and the native language.

The discussions in the preceding sections are not exhaustive, but are simply designed to highlight that learning problems occur for a variety of reasons. These reasons include a lack of teacher preparation in the instruction of multicultural populations, failure to provide instruction, instruction that is not consistent with entry level skills or is inappropriately sequenced, and/or the absence of a system for evaluating and modifying instruction as needed. Consequently, there will be instances when intervention will be focused on teachers and programs, rather than on students.

Step 5
Do student difficulties persist?

If, after evidence is provided that systematic efforts were made to identify the source of difficulty and to take corrective action, student difficulties persist, the next step in the process is to explore other programming alternatives within the mainstream.

Step 6
Have other programming alternatives been tried?

If the student's problem cannot be resolved by the bilingual education or ESL teacher, it may be possible for students to be served through compensatory education programs which provide remedial instruction (i.e., Chapter 1, migrant education, or tutorial programs). If such placements are not readily available, referral to special education can become a "trigger" response when teachers are unable to improve students' achievement.

Effective use of compensatory programs as an alternative to referral requires that teachers understand the purpose of these alternative programs and that they be familiar with eligibility criteria for placement (which students are served by which program). Procedures to coordinate consideration for eligibility across such programs should be developed. For example, when tests and other measures used to determine eligibility vary from program to program, data gathered during assessment for one program may not necessarily provide information that would qualify a student for another, more appropriate, service. Such parallel yet separate processes tend to hinder timely services to students who need them, and increase the burden of testing for both assessment personnel and students.

Finally, it is important that alternative programs be supplemental to, rather than a replacement for, regular classroom instruction and that appropriateness of instruction provided by such services is evaluated as carefully as was instruction in the classroom (see Step 4). Unless these issues are addressed, misplacements in special education can continue to occur despite the availability of these options (Garcia, 1984).

Step 7
Do difficulties continue in spite of alternatives?

If mainstream alternatives prove to be of no avail, then a referral to special education is appropriate. The evidence most critical to determining eligibility will accompany the referral, i.e., verification that (a) the school's curriculum is appropriate; (b) the child's problems are documented across settings and personnel, not only in school, but also at home; (c) difficulties are present both in the native language and in English; (d) the child has been taught but has not made satisfactory progress; (e) the teacher has the qualifications and experience to effectively teach the student; and (f) instruction has been continuous, appropriately sequenced, and has included teaching of skills prerequisite to success. A child who does not learn after this type of systematic, quality intervention is a likely candidate for special education. The referral indicates that a decision has been reached that the child cannot be served by regular education programs alone and that she/he may be handicapped. A comprehensive assessment is requested to determine the nature of the handicapping condition.

While at first glance the model may seem overwhelming, several factors should be kept in mind. First of all, the model suggests the characteristics of effective instruction and thus can be used proactively to develop classroom environments conducive to student success. Moreover, it pinpoints variables which influence student performance, making it easier for teachers to diagnose causes of problems and to attempt solutions. When interventions attempted by teachers fail to yield improved performance, Teacher Assistance Teams provide a relatively simple and cost-effective vehicle for providing additional support to regular classroom teachers in the problem-solving process.

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SUMMARY

Prereferral intervention should be a formal process, governed by a clearly recognizable set of procedures, accepted and followed by all personnel on a district or campus-wide basis, and located under the jurisdiction of regular education. There are major benefits to be gained from the successful implementation of such a process. Serving students in the mainstream is more cost effective than placement in special education, particularly if the student is underachieving, but not handicapped. More importantly, perhaps, are the long-term benefits for students themselves who will have a greater chance of achieving their social, political, and economic potential because they are provided an appropriate education. Unless dropout rates among LEP students are decreased and academic achievement of these students is improved, the loss of earning power, and the concomitant drain on society's resources, will continue to be astronomical. Development of prereferral interventions, in which the major goal is to improve the effectiveness of regular education for language minority students, seems a very cost-effective investment in the future.

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